TO YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN
Acts 2:29-39
BAPTISM

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Thirty four years ago a young couple brought their infant son into a Presbyterian Church: they made some promises: the congregation in attendance that day made some promises: the minister sprinkled some water from the font on the infant's head. And as I thought about it last week I concluded that among the three or four really important things that ever happened to me is my baptism.

Martin Luther, when assailed by self-doubt and despair in the midst of the Protestant Reformation, used to say to himself, or write on his ledger, "Baptizatus sum." - "I was baptized". When I first read that I thought it was a very nice thing to say. But only recently have I come to understand what Luther meant. Only as I have lived long enough to grow out of that adolescent delusion of independence and self-sufficiency: only as I have learned that we are all who we are as a result of a whole composit of relationships: that John Donne was indeed correct when he suggested that not a one of us is an island: that for better or worse we are who we are because of relationships with significant others; mainly parents, church, teachers and friends. I know today, in a way I did not just a few years ago,that I am who I am in large measure because of what my parents were in relationship with me, and that one of the more significant things that young couple did was to carry me into the Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church for the Sacrament of Baptism.

All of us who are members of the church of Jesus Christ have that in common. We may be different in every other way possible: chronologically, politically, racially, socially, economically. But all of us - at one time or another - either in our parents arms or under our own power - were present when the words were said: "I Baptize thee in the name of the father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Baptism is the one common denominator in Christendom. It is the one sure foundation of authentic ecumenicity. Even in those periods when Roman Catholic -

responded and were baptized.

Paul refers to baptism in his letters and himself baptized whole families. In the New Testament there is a clear theological link between the death and resurrection. Jesus Christ and the conversion experience of a new Christian. In Baptism the old man dies - in total immersion symbolized very vividly in the descent into the water - and rises again, a new man, into new life, cleansed, forgiven, with the power of the risen Christ upon him. Baptism was the mark and seal of a Christian and the rite of admission to the church. It still is.

And yet, there are great difference between the early situation and our own. Peter, Paul and the other first Christian missionaries proclaimed a new Gospel in a pagan world. No one had grown up under the influence of Christianity: no one was born and reared in the Christian home: there were none. Every decision to become a Christian was dramatic and traumatic. On the other hand, we live in a nominally Christian culture where everyone regards himself as a Christian even if he is not, and where the evangelists' first task is to make a man feel like a pagan even though he may not be one. We live, that is to say, at the business end of 2,000 years of Christian history and influence: many of us have come from homes consciously Christian: and for us there is a difference in the meaning of Baptism from the man who for the first time in his life heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Emil Brunner, discussing the sacrament, once wrote, "Few of the readers of this book are not baptized, but there are not very many who know what it means to be baptized." That is true, and part of the reason - at least - is that generation after generation of well meaning Christians have refused to acknowledge that our situation is different from the situation that prevails in the New Testament: that we are here - in the twentieth century and not in First Century Corinth: that Baptism if it is to make any sense whatever - must be understood in light of the existing church and the existence of homes that are consciously Christian.

The debate usually focuses on the issue of whether baptism should be

Now, the second part of that in Presbyterianism is confirmation, when a child - now much older, confirms the vows and commitments made on his behalf in infancy. That is to say the work of baptism is completed year later when the child himself stands before the congregation and says in effect: "I now affirm for myself my faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord."

The meaning of Baptism, I believe, is best understood in terms of the three promises that are made or affirmed on the occassion of the sacrament. First, the promise of God which we hear and celebrate: the promise which Peter said is to you and to your children: namely, that God loves, forgives and accepts you: that in Jesus Christ he has acted to give you new life: that God's grace is available to you in the common life even though you have done nothing to deserve it. We affirm all of that in a profound and beautiful way in the sacrament of Baptism. For the infant knows nothing but his immediate physical need: we have not yet had the opportunity to categorize his moral character as good or bad: he is not yet conscious of God - of anything, in fact, but his need for food and warmth and love. And we are saying that God's promise includes him. God loves him as his own: he is safe and secure. That is first, and in that I find most of what is good and joyful and worth celebrating about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second promise is made by the parents. "Do you intend your child to be his disciple: to obey his word and show his love?" I have always felt that this promise means, minimally, that the child will be in church: that he will be here through the years in church school and worship: that he will learn quite early that this building and the people here are an important part of his life. But beyond that the promises we make at Baptism affirm our importance as parents in the total developement of our children. The psychologists have taught us the tremendous importance of the formative years. Erik Erikson suggests that a healthy individual needs to learn "basic trust" and the ones who teach it, or fail to teach it, are the parents, usually before the child is three or four. We know that a child learns to love and accept himself because he senses his

parents who bring their children to baptism are, in a real sense, entrusting a share of their child's welfare to the love of a particular congregation. We ought to bear that responsibility seriously. We ought to learn to look at each other's children in this new light. Our promise Oughtto have meaning whenever we are asked to teach a class: or whenever we happen upon one of our children racing through the sanctuary dropping cookie crumbs, or whenever we sense that oneof our young persons is in special need. For a new relationship has been established and affirmed and sealed between them and us today - a relationship that can mean a great deal, or very little, depending upon how seriously we mean the promise we made.

Every Baptism is a reminder of our own. It is a reminder that we are who we are - not in solitary isolation - but in relationship with others. We have come to learn that there is a life-giving power in relationships. Elisabeth Kubler Ross in a recent seminar on "Death and the Dying Patient" told of a very sophisticated European Hospital that specialized in care for the terminally ill. She had been retained as a consultant, and she discovered that the infants and the very old were isolated in this institution: that nobody wanted to be around them much: nobody knew what to do when they were around them: that the staff was unhappy and that the feel of the institution in those departments was very grim. She made a very simple but profound suggestion: "Get the babies and the Grannies together" - In the same room if possible: let the grannies feed and love the babies when they could. Let the babies feed the grannies with their special love." And a miracle happened: a miracle that always happens when people are enabled to love each other.

The Grandmas had meaning added to their final days and were transformed: the babies responded and were transformed. Human contact: relationship: changed everything and even though babies and grannies were still terminally ill, life began to make a little more sense, and even to be worth living.

The Sacrament of Baptism affirms that same truth. None of us can be a Christian alone. None of us is an only child of God, apart from our brothers